

QA28 – Atkins Diet

QUESTION:

The Atkins Diet of high protein and fat, low carbohydrate seems to be back in force. Everyone is on it! People are seeing weight loss, so believe its legitimacy! Is there any new research on the long-term effects of its use? Is there value to or harm from acidosis? How much is related to water loss and decrease in total intake?

ANSWER:

The Atkins diet was popular in the 1970's and has made a come back with the 1992 publication of "Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution". The basic premise is that a low carbohydrate, high protein diet promotes weight loss by decreasing the production of insulin and promoting ketosis and "fat-burning". No conclusive scientific evidence is available; some studies seem to show that a high protein diet is more effective for weight loss while other studies indicate that high carbohydrate diets are more effective.¹⁻³

Ketosis can lead to a decrease in appetite, and some of the initial rapid weight loss can be attributed to diuresis because of the carbohydrate restriction.⁴ It is most likely that the diet "works" because of decreased intake. Analyses of food patterns of people following the "Zone Diet", another low carbohydrate, high protein diet, indicate that total energy intake is usually no more than 1700 calories per day.⁴

The American Dietetic Association cautions consumers against fad weight loss programs such as high protein, low carbohydrate diets.⁵ The Atkins' diet should only be followed for short periods. Symptoms experienced with the Atkins diet include those associated with ketosis such as tiredness, headaches, constipation, and bad breath. A severely limited intake might lead to symptoms associated with nutrient deficiencies and even hair loss as listed on their website.

References:

- 1) Piatti PM et al. Hypocaloric High-Protein Diet Improves Glucose Oxidation and Spares Lean Body Mass: Comparison to Hypocaloric High-Carbohydrate Diet. *Metabolism* 1994; 43(12) 1481-7.
- 2) Siggaard R et al. Weight Loss during 12 week's Ad Libitum Carbohydrate-Rich Diet in Overweight and Normal-Weight Subjects at a Danish Work Site. *Obes Res* 1996; 4(4):347-56.
- 3) Alford BB et al. Carbohydrate, Protein, and Fat Content of the Diet upon Weight Loss, Blood Values, and Nutrient Intake of Adult Obese Women. *J Am Diet Assoc* 1990; 90(4):534-40.
- 4) Laquatra, I. Nutrition for Weight Management, in Krause's Food, Nutrition, and Diet Therapy 10th ed. Mahan LK and Escott-Stump, eds. WB Saunders Co., 2000.
- 5) Duyff, RL. The American Dietetic Association's Complete Food and Nutrition Guide. 1996.
- 6) www.atkinscenter.com, The Official Website for Dr. Atkins.